

preferably prepared by the beverage producer and preferably advertise at least one of the beverages being dispensed by the dispenser 10. In a preferred embodiment, the advertisements include preexisting radio or television advertisements known to the customers.

Preferably, the metering device 30 tracks the number of servings dispensed, the total volume of beverage dispensed or any other data that can be used to estimate the number of customers who purchased beverage and therefore likely observed the advertisements (block 112). This data can be used to determine the effectiveness of particular advertisements or promotions. For example, the effectiveness of a particular advertisement can be evaluated by comparing the rate at which the beverage is dispensed during, following, and preceding, the display of particular advertisements. The optional counters described above can also or instead be used to track the number of times and time of day the advertisements are displayed. Periodically, and preferably in the same intervals as the payments or installments to the preferred provider, an advertising fee is calculated (block 116). Preferably, the advertising fee is based on the amount of beverage dispensed during the interval when the advertisements were displayed. However, alternative bases can also or instead be used, including without limitation the number of times and time of day the advertisements were displayed, advertising display time, and the like. This advertising fee is then used by the retailer to offset the lease or purchase payments made to the preferred provider (block 120). Preferably, the beverage provider pays the advertising fee directly to the preferred dispenser provider, thereby reducing the retailer's payment to the preferred provider. In other preferred embodiments, the advertising fee is paid directly to the retailer (however, it should first be determined that such a payment does not violate any applicable government regulations).

Although the advertising, revenue generation, and display payment process described above and illustrated in FIG. 3 is preferred, alternative embodiments of the present invention are possible. For example, advertising revenue (due to the retailer) can be determined and be payable in a number of different manners. Rather than being based upon the amount of beverage dispensed during the interval when the advertisements were displayed, advertising revenue due can be a flat fee payable periodically or in one or more lump sums (such as upon purchase of the dispenser 10), can be based in whole or in part upon the retailer's size, receipts

from sales of beverages dispensed from the dispenser 10, the amount of beverage provided to the retailer by the provider, the size of the dispenser 10 (e.g., the number of dispensing nozzles in the dispenser 10), and the like, and be at least partially dependent upon the number, size, and type of display devices associated with the dispenser 10. In any case, the advertising revenue due need not necessarily be based upon the amount of beverage dispensed from the dispenser 10 or the number of times the advertisement(s) are displayed, although such bases are most preferred.

The embodiments described above and illustrated in the figures are presented by way of example only and are not intended as a limitation upon the concepts and principles of the present invention. As such, it will be appreciated by one having ordinary skill in the art that various changes in the elements and their configuration and arrangement are possible without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention as set forth in the appended claims. For example (and as suggested above), instead of determining and paying the advertising fee at regular intervals that substantially correspond to the payment intervals for the dispenser 10, the advertising fee could be estimated prior to the display of the advertisements by comparing the retail outlet that is currently purchasing the beverage dispenser 10 to a similarly situated retail outlet that has been advertising for a given amount of time. Such an estimate of the advertising fee could eliminate much of the tracking, monitoring, and reporting needed to independently calculate the advertising fee, and thereby save time and money for all parties involved.

If the beverage dispenser 10 is purchased in one lump sum payment, this estimated advertising fee would provide a good way of determining how much the base price could be reduced. In some cases, such lump sum purchase payments can be less attractive due to the uncertainty of estimating advertising fees and the possible need to police the retail outlet to be sure the advertisements being paid for are actually being displayed. Generally, the method of the present invention is preferably used in conjunction with leased dispensers or dispensers that are being paid off in regular installments, but nonetheless can be used in conjunction with lump sum purchases.

One having ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that a number of different hardware configurations are possible for the apparatus of the present invention. As mentioned above, the invention can be practiced with any type of beverage dispenser available, since the equipment needed for displaying the advertisements need not be mounted directly to the dispenser. Furthermore, any available hardware systems can be used to display the advertisements in the retail outlet. This includes systems and/or components purchased from third party vendors and systems that are already being used in the retail outlet for other purposes, such as television viewing or the broadcasting of music. Thus, the equipment needed to display the advertisements need not be purchased from the preferred dispenser provider directly and need not be dedicated to displaying advertisements. If this is the case, it can be desirable to have the display system inspected and/or approved by the beverage provider who will be doing the advertising.

If the display system is not dedicated to displaying advertisements, and the advertisements will not be shown substantially continuously or at approved intermittent increments, the metering device 30 can be linked to the output device 50 such that the advertising fee is calculated only for periods where the advertisements are being displayed. For example, the metering device 30 could track the amount of beverage dispensed only when the output device 50 is on and in the "play" mode (i.e., transmitting a signal to the viewing devices or the audio transmitting devices). This assumes, of course, that the output device 50 is not being used or cannot be used for purposes other than displaying the advertisements. The use of non-dedicated viewing devices may be appealing to retailers who often need additional viewing devices for special events.